

Program Description

September 2004

Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program

Overview

The Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP) is a voluntary program that encourages creation of high quality wildlife habitats that support wildlife populations of National, State, Tribal, and local significance. Through WHIP, the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) provides technical and financial assistance to landowners and others to develop upland, wetland, riparian, and aquatic habitat areas on their property.

Authority

Section 387 of the Federal Agricultural Improvement and Reform Act of 1996 authorized NRCS to work with landowners to develop wildlife habitat on their property. WHIP is reauthorized in the Farm Security and Rural Investment Act of 2002 (Farm Bill). NRCS works with private landowners and operators; conservation districts; and Federal, State, and Tribal agencies. Funding for WHIP comes from the Commodity Credit Corporation.

Scope

WHIP is available in all 50 States, the Caribbean Area (Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands), and the Pacific Basin Area (Guam, American Samoa, and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands). To participate in WHIP, NRCS State offices must submit a State WHIP plan.

Eligibility

Land. Eligible lands under the program are:

- Privately owned land;

- Federal land when the primary benefit is on private or Tribal land;
- State and local government land on a limited basis; and
- Tribal land.

If land is determined eligible, NRCS places emphasis on enrolling:

- Habitats for wildlife species experiencing declining or significantly reduced populations;
- Practices beneficial to fish and wildlife that may not otherwise be funded; and
- Wildlife and fishery habitats identified by local and State partners and Indian Tribes in each State.

Entity. To be eligible, an entity must own or have control of the land to be enrolled in the program for the duration of the agreement period.

The Adjusted Gross Income provision of the 2002 Farm Bill impacts eligibility for WHIP and several other 2002 Farm Bill programs. Individuals or entities that have an average adjusted gross income exceeding \$2.5 million for the three tax years immediately preceding the year the contract is approved are not eligible to receive program benefits or payments. However, an exemption is provided in cases where 75 percent of the adjusted gross income is derived from farming, ranching, or forestry operations.

Application Process

The WHIP application process consists of the following five steps:

- A landowner submits an application to an NRCS local office, conservation district office, or office of a designated cooperating entity.
- The local work group identifies local wildlife habitat priorities and then communicates these priorities to the State Technical Committee. The NRCS State Conservationist consults with the State Technical Committee to rank the applications received in the field based on the State WHIP plan and the state established ranking criteria.
- When funds are available, NRCS makes allocations to the NRCS State offices based on the expressed unfunded demand for the program, the priorities in the State WHIP plan, and the level of contribution by partner organizations.
- The NRCS State Conservationist commits allocated funds to high ranking landowner offers and enters into long-term agreements with selected participants.
- Following agreement signature by NRCS and the selected entity, funds are obligated to the project, and the participant may begin to implement the wildlife habitat development plan.

Determining National WHIP Allocations

WHIP funding is available to States that submit an NRCS State WHIP plan to the National office. Allocations may be adjusted based on updated plans received and at the discretion of the NRCS Chief.

The State Conservationist is responsible for developing a State WHIP plan with advice from the State Technical Committee. The State Technical Committee receives input from many sources, including the local work groups convened by conservation districts.

The State WHIP plan includes ranking considerations used by the State, the National criteria identified in the WHIP rule, and other State ranking criteria. The criteria include, but are not limited to, proximity to protected clusters of wildlife habitat, projected longevity of the habitat created, parcel size, type of land use, maximum cost expended per acre, and degree of leveraging by a partnering entity. State ranking criteria are developed on a State-by-State basis and are available if requested.

Criteria Used to Evaluate Proposals

Each State develops a ranking system to ensure consistent and efficient WHIP implementation. The ranking process assists the State Conservationist in determining parcels that merit WHIP enrollment. Ranking criteria, derived from the State WHIP plan, enable the State Conservationist to prioritize proposals.

The State Conservationist, with assistance from the State Technical Committee, establishes a weighted ranking process to prioritize eligible proposals and parcels. Priority is given to projects that will protect habitat or species of National or regional significance.

Standard 5- to 10-year Program Agreements

Once selected, entities must work with the appropriate NRCS office to finalize and sign WHIP agreements, incorporating all WHIP requirements. A WHIP agreement is the legal contract with which the NRCS establishes its relationship with the participant; State, Tribal, or local government entities; or non-governmental organizations.

15-year agreements

In exchange for entering into a 15-year WHIP agreement, a landowner may receive higher cost-share rates for the implementation of habitat development practices on essential plant and animal habitat. Up to 15 percent of available WHIP funds can be used to enter into 15-year agreements.

For More Information

If you need more information about WHIP, please contact your local USDA Service Center, listed in the telephone book under U.S. Department of Agriculture, or your local conservation district. Information also is available on the World Wide Web at:

<http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/farmbill/2002/>



Visit USDA on the Web at:

<http://www.usda.gov/farmbill>

Note: This is not intended to be a definitive interpretation of farm legislation. Rather, it is preliminary and may change as USDA develops implementing policies and procedures. Please check back for updates.